The Word in Search of Words
John 6:46-51; 59-65
August 29, 1971

Week after week, year after year, indeed century after century, in thousands upon thousands of parishes, men have stood up and, for twenty minutes, half an hour, sometimes longer, done what I am about to do -- preach a sermon to a congregation of Christian people. It is surely no overstatement to suggest that in the entire history of humanity, no project has received such a torrent of rhetoric as the preaching of the Gospel. And yet I am not at all certain that this major undertaking is fully understood by those who participate in it, preacher and listeners. I sometimes feel that the sermon, like a lot of other things in the church, simply happens - for reasons of custom and tradition. And that because we have no common understanding of what it is that is happening, we have a very low expectation level, with the predictable result that the outcome of this time-consuming endeavor is minimal. This is not to say that we expect nothing of a sermon. In fact, it is painfully obvious that a lot of people have rather articulate expectations, which often are at variance with the preacher's understanding of his task. Thus the listener can go home complaining that the preacher didn't preach the Gospel, while he is confidently assuming that that is precisely what he did.

And so - this morning - a sermon about sermons. "The Word in Search of Words." Paul Scherer, great preacher, master of the art, professor of Homiletics at Princeton Seminary, begins a book on preaching with this observation: "Before the Word of God can get itself lived, it needs to get itself believed - and what is believed is not always lived. But before it can get itself believed, it has to get itself heard - and what is heard is not always believed. Farther back than that, however, is the hurdle which is to be our chief concern: before the Word of God can get itself heard, it must get itself said - and what is said is not always heard." [The Word God Sent, p 3]

Paul Scherer contends that Protestant preaching has not always "said" the Word of God - for a number of reasons, most of which we will think about this morning. The sermon, Scherer feels, is the place where the Gospel of Jesus Christ gets emasculated, where the demand is softened to make it more palatable, where the cutting edge is smoothed over, where the exclusiveness is made general and broad and inoffensive. It is also the place in the life of the church where the Gospel is most vigorously rejected - where people either fail or refuse to hear the Word that is addressed to them. Scherer quotes a leading Roman Catholic theologian to the effect that if Protestantism ever dies, the dagger in its back will be the Protestant sermon.

Now, that kind of talk makes me a little uneasy and more than a little defensive. But I sense its truth - and I worry about it - and I often wonder about the meaning of this exercise which consumes a major portion of my time and energy, this weekly ritual in which I talk at you for twenty minutes. And I am presuming this morning to talk about it with you in hopes that the exercise may be helpful to all of us.

In the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, part of which we heard this morning, Jesus is preaching. The Greek word for it is kerygma - proclaimation - the simple, straightforward holding up of truth. "I am the bread of life." And the response of his listeners is very interesting: "This is more than we can stomach! Why listen to such words?" There it is in a nutshell. The exclusive claim of Christianity: the unbending, unvarnished integrity of our Lord: and the horrified response of those who heard it.

That's the model that sets out the perimeters of our dilemma when we begin to think about preaching and listening to sermons. In our time - in our culture the Christian Religion appears to have very little to do with proclaimation of anything. In stead, religion is the source of easy answers to life's questions.

In the popular mind the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be reduced to "good advice for good living": How to be successful: How to be happy: How to find peace: How to overcome anxiety: how to do this and do that.

And within that context, the sermon that deals with those particular kinds of concerns is guaranteed a certain success. People will like it. Mary Pickford wrote a book once under the title "Why Not Try God?" And Halford Luccock, a brilliant preacher wrily answered, "Why not Try Aspirin?" God is not a cosmic aspirin tablet - the God who stalks the pages of the Bible cannot be bottled and marketed as a pallative to the heartburn and headaches of modern life. Integrity won't allow it.

But something more important will - namely success. Now, the people who preach sermons are men - no more, no less. They - we - like to be liked, enjoy popularity and esteem. It's very good for the ego to feel that people are coming to hear what you have to say. Given the institutional nature of Christianity, it's also very good for the budget and family and career. And so - preacher and people - inevitably do a little selling out. Some - I know - all the time. All - I am convinced - some of the time. The formula is quite clear. Success - whether you are a preacher involved vocationally, or a layman who loves the church and wants its pews and bank account full - happens when the sermons are liked and enjoyed. And sermons are liked and enjoyed when they are superficial essays on "how to succeed in business with Jesus."

The trouble is that there isn't much of that in the Bible. While preachers try to offer ways out of life's predicaments, the Bible keeps confronting men with the radical nature of their predicament. While preachers try to comfort the distressed, a major portion of the Bible is devoted to distressing the comfortable. While preachers try to answer questions, the Bible sets out time and time again to provoke questions.

When Jesus preached - when he proclaimed the Good News that God reigns - he always dug very deeply to the heart of the matter. His listeners had religion, plenty of religion. They had religious rules and customs and rituals. What they did not have was Good News: Salvation: New LIfe. And the crux of their problem was that they weren't aware of the depths of their own need. So he probed and probed deeply. When the guilty adultress was about to be stoned according to religious law he probed by suggesting that the man without guilt might throw the first stone. And that probing went deeper into their hearts than anything had before. Guilt was no longer simple guilt, but a deep and intense and universal malady that everyone of them would have to deal with.

That kind of preaching is not the kind that wins a man a raise next year. It is not very uplifting, nor comforting. But it is the Word of God having found human words that get it said.

Someone has commented that you haven't heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, until you've been made uneasy by it. Thus, the first problem with preaching and listening to sermons. If they are honest - if they communicate the Word - they aren't always going to be pleasant, and they aren't ever going to be light.

The second impact of our dilemma has to do with the use of words. One way to describe what happens in the life of a church is that people learn to use a certain vocabulary. And the kinds of words in the vocabulary depends on the kind of church it is. If you had attended a fundamentalist church this morning you would have heard words like hell, heaven, saved, blood, conversion, sanctification, Holy Ghost. The sermon would have included them: the people would have been comfortable using them. If you had attended a Unitarian-universalist Church you might have heard words like, neurosis, anxiety, self-awareness, self-actualisation. As it is you are in a Presbyterian Church and

our words follow the lines of providence, reconciliation, justification, forgiveness and so on.

And in all three instances there is a certain assumption that we have arrived where we can be comfortable with the same vocabulary: that if we say the right words - we have reached the zenith of our particular brand of faith. Sermons are word studies. In our particular tradition theological word studies. We make the very dangerous assumption that if a sermon teaches the meaning of a word, traces its linguistic derivation, supplies Hebrew and Greek synonyms, that if all understand, somehow we've accomplished something significant.

Trouble with that is that is isn't very Biblical either. Preaching is not an intellectual exercise, no matter how erudite and stimulating. Preaching ought to be the communication of the Word - the idea - the idea that connects with our feelings and attitudes and behavior. Preaching has intellectual content to be sure, but if it has no emotional content it is sterile and dry and without life. You and I can talk and think about words like love and forgiveness and joy till we're blue in the face. But it doesn't amount to much until here, in this community of believers, those words and ideas become realities. Joy - just a word until it gets itself expressed here. Love - an empty succession of letters, until it is felt and realized here.

Preaching and listening to sermons, then, involves the flow of ideas and feelings between people, not the teaching of concepts or theories. Our common task is not to develop theological thinkers, but people who are growing into a theological way of perceiving all of life: people who know what it feels like to be loved by God and other people, and who become the incarnation of that good news everywhere they go.

I've indulged myself this morning, which according to the standards implicit in what I've been saying, is not necessarily to have preached a sermon. I've done it because I deeply believe that the prerequisite to any significant sermon experience is a common understanding between people and

preacher. Occasionally we need - simply to blow out the system - and discover if, in fact, we are starting from the same position as this weekly exercise begins.

And in conclusion, allow me to preach. Behind it all - behind this presumptuous gesture of one man standing before a congregation week after week to talk - to be heard - is an assumption about God himself, and the nature of the Christian Gospel. We believe that the phrase "The Word of God" is not a document - not the Bible - not an utterance - but a way of describing God's nature. We believe it is the nature of God to be communicating with men: that because his nature is to communicate we are talking about a living reality where we talk about his word. We believe God has spoken in the history of his people and in the voices of their prophets. We believe he speaks through the words of a book - a book of history, laws, poetry, prophetic writings, and little tracts called Gospels. We believe that book contains his word - his communication. We believe God spoke in Jesus Christ - in his life, teaching, death and resurrection. And because of that last - that resurrection - we believe God continues to speak through the Risen Christ in our midst.

We believe that God addresses us in the common life: that he uses the words of another to speak to us: the ramblings and meanderings of our own mind: the experiences that weave their way in and out of our lives.

We believe also, and this is the essence of the Reformed tradition, that God speaks to his people whenever, in the context of worship, a man stands up and puts his intellect, emotions, skills and understandings on the line: whenever he loves his people and has listened for the word and tries to speak we believe "The word finds words:, and God does communicate, sometimes in spite of what he says.

We believe that the word is alive and accessible: that it comes to us as

judgement and demand and forgiveness and love: that it tells us who we really are and what we could become: that it comes at the point of our deepest needs - needs we sometimes aren't ready to acknowledge.

Our task then - weekly as preacher and people - but daily as Christian disciples together - is to listen to God speaking through each other: to share in open and honest dialogue: to support each other as attempt to live what we hear.

Amen.

Our father, you have spoken to men in generations past. So speak to us, as we gather here - week in and week out. Give us ears to hear. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.